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A New Commandment—A New Way

I’m an admirer of Garrison Keillor, creator, producer and star of a weekly NPR program, Prairie Home Companion. If you’ve ever heard Keillor, you know that he is wise, funny, literate, has a nice bass singing voice, knows a lot of hymns and generally seems to understand the human condition, and understands, to a remarkable degree, how human beings behave in church.

His weekly monologues are about life in a fictional Minnesota town, Lake Wobegon. There are fascinating people in Lake Wobegon, like people we all know. And there are three interesting institutions: The Chatterbox Café, where locals gather to drink coffee and gossip; The Side Track Tap, where they, mostly men, gather to drink beer and talk about what men like to talk about; and The Lutheran Church. Churches,

particularly Lutheran Churches, show up in a lot of Keillor's material.

In one story, a favorite of mine, Keillor explains that Lutherans first came to Lake Wobegon long ago, from Norway — because of a terrible church fight. They got into an argument over whether they would recognize one another in heaven. Would they be recognizable in heaven, have the same faces? They fought if out for years. Some declared, with total confidence "of course we'll know Grandma there, and she will know us." With equal certainty the other side announced, "No, we will go to a finer and better place, and if you think your face is anything God would allow in a place of perfect bliss, then you ought to take another look (in the mirror)."

The argument became so fierce that people would have gladly avoided heaven if it meant they'd have to associate with "those other" Lutherans. And so the little Norwegian Church split into two factions: the "Facial Recognition in Heaven" and the "No Facial Recognition in Heaven" factions. Their pastor was so sick of the fighting, so exhausted, that he and his wife packed up, left

for America and started a new Lutheran Church in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. [Life Among the Lutherans, p36-37.]

We Presbyterians don't have a monopoly on church fights, but we've become pretty good at it over the years. And with the possible exception of the Baptists, we resolve our conflicts by walking away from one another and starting a new church, or a new denomination. There are several major Presbyterian denominations in the United States alone, and many smaller ones, each one founded when a group of people became angry over a difference in beliefs, doctrine, practice, walked away and formed their own denomination. Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the largest by far, split at the time of the Civil War into a Northern Presbyterian Church and a Southern Presbyterian Church. It took more than a century for us to get back together. And when we did reunite several hundred congregations wanted nothing to do with it because the reunited Presbyterian Church would have women ministers. So they walked away, formed a new denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, or the PCA, and we barely speak to one another. At this moment in time, another split is brewing: the

issues are theology and biblical interpretation and the ordination of gay and lesbian Presbyterians.

You know, there is nothing so bitter as a family fight, a civil war, and there is nothing so tragic, and so sad as a church fight.

Familiarity breeds contempt, it is said, and there is no place where Christianity, the Good News of Jesus Christ, collides as dramatically with the reality of the human condition, than when we start to talk about love—love for neighbors, love for enemies, and perhaps most challenging of all, love for one another.

And yet love is central to Christianity—to Christian theology, Christian practice, Christian religion.

> For God so love the world that he gave his only son.
>
> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.
>
> Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God.
>
> Perfect love casts out fear.
>
> Faith, hope and love abide, and the greatest of these is love.

And—

> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

The Fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to John, was written maybe 70-75 years after the life of Jesus. The original disciples are gone. So is everyone who actually saw and knew and heard Jesus. It is a time of persecution for believers, known as ‘people of the way.’

John doesn't bother with a birth story, no Bethlehem, manger, shepherds or wise men. Instead, John begins with a staggering assertion. The Word, the eternal Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. God—the mysterious essence of all that is. What Plato called “the primal unity” — is not off in some corner of the universe, or in a corner of the human intellect, a safely abstract concept, but has come to live in human history, in the life of a Palestinian Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, whom his followers now call the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

John’s second staggering assertion is that the best word to describe the God revealed in Jesus is love. In the history of ideas, that is new. God has always been described in words like power, majesty, omnipotence, righteousness. God has always been described as holy, a righteous judge who rewards and punishes people. But God— as love: God is love. That is absolutely unique.

As John’s story of Jesus moves toward its conclusion, love keeps emerging as the central point: the love God is; the love Jesus embodies and expresses by laying down his life; the love his followers are called to live out in the world. Apparently, Jesus hopes to live on in the world in the love of his followers.

Near the end, on the night in which he will be betrayed and arrested, Jesus and his friends are sharing the evening meal. It is the night before the Passover. They are all there: the twelve, Peter, James and John, probably his mother and Mary Magdalene, maybe his dear friend Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary. The atmosphere must have been thick with tension and foreboding. They can see what is happening, how the

Temple and Political authorities are conspiring to get rid of him and how he seems determined not to run away, back to the safety of Galilee, but to go through with it, to meet whatever is coming, with courage and with love.

He washed their feet that night. A servant usually did it before supper. Jesus knelt in front of each one, washed their feet. And then he said:

> “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.
>
> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for on another.”

There is no Eucharist, Communion, in John. No bread broken and “this is my body.” No cup and “this is my blood.” Instead, in the Fourth Gospel, there is the washing of feet and the new commandment to love.

Some churches practice liturgical foot washing. Pope Francis set a promising precedent by washing the feet of several poor people.

Francis Taylor Gench, who teaches New Testament at Union Theological Seminary, says that she was invited to a foot washing once and fretted so much about it that she decided not to go. She writes: “For one thing I couldn’t figure out the logistics and what to do with my panty hose, but to be honest, my deepest discomfort was that it was an act of extraordinary intimacy.” Gench was part of a planning committee for a women’s conference once when someone proposed foot washing. The chairperson ended the discussion by saying, “if I announce that we are planning a foot washing, half the women won’t show up and the other half will spend the afternoon getting a pedicure. [Encounter With Jesus. p. 102]

With scholarly precision Gench observes that there are two moral imperatives here that are critical, two things Jesus wants his followers to do after he is gone.

The first is to receive his love; stop objecting — “I’m not worthy Lord,” stop resisting—“I should be washing your feet Jesus.” Just be silent and receive the love of God that is being given and which will be given as he lives his life to the end.

The second is simple: to love one another like that; to love neighbors like that; to show the world that truth of the Christian gospel by the depth and power of Christian love.

You and I have trouble with both. We are uncomfortable receiving a gift unless we have a way to reciprocate. It's much easier for many of us to extend hospitality than to receive it. The great theological Karl Barth said that in our heart of hearts we do not like the idea of grace, don't like to be told that we do not deserve the gift, have not and cannot earn it.

The history of religion is the story of human attempts to attach conditions to God's love; rules, regulations, rituals, obligations that will make us feel that we do deserve God's good will. And the word here is: stop; be silent; quit objecting; quit trying to make yourself deserving, and simply ponder the amazing proposition that you are loved eternally by the one who created you, the one who gave his life away and died on the cross to show you that love.

And then "love like that, love one another like that, love one another as I have loved you — so that the world will know…"

He did not say “like one another,” “be nice to one another,” and for that we may be grateful. I do not have to like my enemies, he does tell me to love them. I do not have to like the Chechnyan brothers who massacred and maimed innocent people and children in Boston. But Jesus commands me to love them.

It may be the most difficult thing he ever asked of us. How can we do this? How can we love someone we don’t like? It was a moment of revelation for me when it finally dawned on me that Christian love is not a feeling at all. It is an act, a way of behaving, living, relating.

How can we obey his commandment? There is only one way and it begins not in your will, your emotions and feeling. It begins deep in your heart where you come to terms with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that you are loved quite apart from your deserving, quite apart from anything you have done or failed to do. You are loved unconditionally.

And then slowly, gradually at first, you find yourself expressing your gratitude for God’s love for you — by extending it to someone else, someone close to you perhaps, someone with

whom you have had issues, someone with whom you disagree and argue and fight.

It doesn’t begin in you and me. It begins in him; his love. And when it is lived in the world it becomes the most powerful witness to the truth of God. More powerful than libraries of elegant theology, more powerful than heroic piety and moral purity.

Did you read in the paper recently the account of the Medal of Honor presented posthumously to Father Emil Kapaun, an Army Chaplain who died in a North Korea prison of war camp in 1951? He was 35, known as the “Shepherd in Combat Boots.”

The citation read: in November 1950, when his unit, Third Battalion, Eighth Cavalry Division was attacked by Communist Chinese forces, “FR. Kapaun walked through withering fire and hand-to-hand combat to provide medical aid and comfort and Last Rites to wounded and dying troops.” When he saw a Chinese soldier about to execute a wounded comrade, Sergeant First Class Herbert Miller, Fr. Kaupan shoved the gun away.

He carried Miller on a forced march to a P.O.W. camp. Through the winter of 1950, as American GIs froze to death and died of starvation, Fr. Kaupan found a way to sneak out to bring back food and cleansed prisoners wounds.

He celebrated Mass on Easter Sunday in the prison camp, was put in solitary confinement without food or water. He died of dysentery, pneumonia and a blood clot in May of 1951.

At the war's end, survivors of the camp in which he died walked out into freedom carrying a wooden crucifix they had made to honor him.

At the award ceremony this month President Obama said:

> "This is the valor we honor today. An American soldier who didn't' fire a gun, but who wielded the mightiest weapon of all, a love for his brothers so pure that he was willing to die so that they might live."

"Jesus died for our sins," it is said but he also died for love, to show you how profoundly you are loved. He is the amazing Word of God. "I love you. I want you to tell the world about me by your

love. I want you to be a church that loves the world as much as I do. I want you to live in my love. I want you to love your dearest ones, to love your neighbors, to love one another, so the world will know about me.

“Fear not,” he says, “I will love you to the end of the world.”

Whatever happens to you, I will love you.

I will love you every day of your life, right up to the last one—and beyond. Forever.

What wondrous love is this, o my God, o my soul?

Amen.

John 13:1-5

1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. **2** The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper **3** Jesus, knowing

that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, **4** got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. **5** Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

John 13:12-15

12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? **13** You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. **14** So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. **15** For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

John 13:31-35

31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has
been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. **32** If God has
been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will
glorify him at once. **33** Little children, I am with you only a little
longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say
to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come.' **34** I give you a new
commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved
you, you also should love one another. **35** By this everyone will
know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."